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2005 WSOP: Twenty Down, Twenty-Two to Go

Back in 1949, long before the days of tournament poker, Benny Binion arranged a heads-up poker match between two poker greats: Johnny Moss and Nick "The Greek" Dandalos. Binion set up the match to be played in public view, drawing a crowd to his casino as the titans battled for several months. Dandalos eventually forfeited the competition after losing an estimated $2 million to Moss. (Back when that was an astronomical sum of money.)

It was another 21 years before Binion started the *World Series of Poker,* and this year marks the 36th incarnation, having grown from a handful of invited players (who voted on a winner) to a field of thousands that will battle in 45 events over the course of six weeks. This also marks the first time that it won't be held at Binion's Horseshoe in downtown Las Vegas. Fields that Benny Binion couldn't even imagine demand a much larger, much more modern space, and Harrah's was all too happy to use their convention space at the Rio.

With the first 20 events in the books, it's time to look back on the first half of this year's *World Series of Poker.*

Top Performances

The first public event was $1,500 No-Limit Hold'em (Event #2), and it filled the tournament room to capacity with 2,200 players. With alternates, the total number of entrants climbed to 2,305, which easily made it the second-largest live tournament in history, second only to last year's main event. In fact, if there were room for more tables in the tournament room (it currently holds 200), it likely would have passed last year's championship.

While few events have literally packed the room, every event is showing substantial growth over last year, even in less publicized events like Pot-Limit Omaha Hi-Lo Split. In the past, professional players gathered at the *World Series* and recognized most of the faces; now, they often find themselves at a table filled with unknowns.

Ten years ago, a table of unknowns would have been a godsend, meaning you were sitting with dead money. Not any more. There is still plenty of dead money out there, but those players blend in with the unknowns who have perfected their craft on the Internet, skilled at playing large-scale tournaments. The obnoxiously loud 20-something at the table might just be making six figures a year playing online poker.

While luck will always play a factor, skill still manages to rise to the top. The first 20 bracelet winners include big names (and previous bracelet winners) like Allen Cunningham, Erik Seidel, T.J. Cloutier, Barry Greenstein, and Josh Arieh. In fact, the final three or four players at the final tables usually have several bracelets between them.

Who have been the top performers this year? Eleven people have already made two final tables, which is an amazing accomplishment in fields of 500-1,500 players:

Allen Cunningham (1st, 4th)

Quinn Do (1st, 5th)

Erik Seidel (1st, 9th)

Toto Leonidas (2nd, 4th)

Harry Demetriou (2nd, 6th)

Chris "Jesus" Ferguson (2nd, 7th)

Cyndy Violette (2nd, 7th)

Phil Gordon (3rd, 8th)

Tony Ma (3rd, 9th)

Rodeen Talebi (6th, 7th)

Minh Nguyen (7th, 9th)

Allen Cunningham has to be the early favorite for the 2005 WSOP Player of the Year honors, winning a bracelet in Event #2 ($1,500 No-Limit Hold'em), finishing 4th in Event #20 ($5,000 Pot-Limit Hold'em), and cashing three times for a total of $905,135. But there is still a lot of poker to be played, and nobody is running away with the title — yet.

In terms of cashes, Steve Zolotow ($32,455) and Marco Traniello ($67,875) lead the pack with five each (25% of the events so far). Traniello, who might be better known as Jennifer Harman's husband, has also made a final table, finishing 7th in Event #11 ($2,000 Pot-Limit Hold'em). Combined with Harman's third-place finish in Event #18 ($2,000 Seven-Card Stud Hi-Lo Split), it's been a strong *World Series* for the Harman-Traniello household.

Speaking of cashes, Phil Hellmuth entered this year just one cash behind Berry Johnston on the all-time list for number of cashes at the *World Series of Poker*. Hellmuth wasted no time, tying the score at 46 cashes when he made the money in Event #2. Hellmuth was understandably excited by this, but Johnston wouldn't give up the title without a fight. Both players have cashed twice more since then, and the career mark is still tied between them at 48. This is definitely a race worth watching.

Poker, Poker, and More Poker

One of the reasons top players show up from around the world is the side games, and there is something for everyone at the Rio. The cash game area is conveniently located in the tournament room (it's that big), and there are games for every taste and every bankroll, from $4-$8 to $400-$800. The cash game area (near the entrance) is often much livelier than the intense competitiveness of the tournaments, and still an excellent place to spot famous players.

Of course, it wouldn't be a tournament without satellites, and Harrah's runs plenty of them each day. There is also a second-chance tournament each evening for those players who either show up late or bust out early. No matter where your poker taste lies (cash games, satellites, tournaments), you'll find what you're looking for at the *World Series*.

Harrah's First World Series of Poker

This is the first year the *World Series* is not being held Downtown, but none of the players seem to mind. (Note: The final two days of the Main Event will be held at the Horseshoe, in honor of the centennial celebration for Las Vegas.) The Horseshoe was a quaint and authentic gambling hall for the smaller fields of the past, but last year's chaotic monstrosity made even the most nostalgic players realize the *Series* had outgrown the Horseshoe.

The tournament itself is being held in a gigantic convention hall at the Rio, seemingly miles away from the casino. But what the room lacks in character, it makes up with plenty of space, clean air, and good lighting. For the most part, tournament players (new and old) give Harrah's high marks on the tournament room.

There have been a few complaints, but they seem to be an unavoidable result of the huge turnout. Harrah's tried to avert long lines by allowing a long preregistration period, but long lines appeared nonetheless. There have also been a few late starts (still within half an hour), but it's only fair to give all the players time to find their seats. There have also been some complaints about inconsistent rulings on a table-by-table basis. This is not an easy task with 200 tables in play, but this is something that Harrah's can (and should) work to improve upon.

When it quickly became clear that the larger events couldn't be completed in two days as scheduled, they didn't mess with the blind structures or institute 24-hour sessions. Instead, all events over 1,500 players will automatically become three-day events. In addition, *ESPN* intervened after some late final table starts, and now any event that will be taped for television will also be a three-day event. This allows *ESPN* to start (and finish) their work at reasonable hours.

It's impossible to please all of the people all of the time, especially with competing interests (Harrah's staff, *ESPN*, media, players). But Tournament Director Johnny Grooms has made all of his decisions with the players' best interests at heart. And that's the way it should be. The *World Series of Poker*, after all, is about the poker.

The Media Presence

The media presence this year surpasses anything done before. As they did last year, *ESPN* is taping some of the final tables for their delayed broadcasts, but there is far more live coverage available than ever before. Card Player has a team of reporters covering multiple events each day, providing chip counts, eliminations, and impressions from the tournament floor. For most final tables, CardPlayer.com provides a live update chronicling each and every hand, so you can follow all the ups and downs as the final players battle for a bracelet.

There are photographers everywhere, both professional and amateur. (Feel free to take your own photos, but be respectful of the players, and don't use a flash.) There are also video crews providing interviews and insights into the festivities. (A handful of new videos are available each day at CardPlayer.com.)

For a new perspective, Phil Gordon is carrying around an audio recorder, whispering his thoughts and strategies in between rounds as he plays the big events. He then saves these recordings online as podcasts, available for anyone to download for free from the Internet.

The media presence will only increase as the championship event nears, as more of the mainstream media takes notice. (Most of them think the *World Series of Poker* begins and ends with a single $10,000 buy-in event.) One thing is certain — this will be the most documented poker tournament in history.

Miscellaneous

Once you get used to the immense scope of it all, you can focus on the more interesting details at this year's *World Series.* There are a few vendor booths outside the tournament room, including a Card Player booth outside the main entrance. Stop by to pick up a *WSOP* t-shirt, watch some video interviews with players, or have the Card Player girls show you the excellent tournament coverage on CardPlayer.com.

As spectators look for their favorite players in the crowd, it doesn't take long to notice the Full Tilt sports jerseys. Full Tilt, an online poker site, has assembled a "team" of top professional players, and they all proudly wear Full Tilt jerseys with their name and number on the back. If poker were baseball, Full Tilt would be the New York Yankees, scooping up all the best free agents. (Phil Ivey, Chris "Jesus" Ferguson, Howard Lederer, Jennifer Harman, Erick Lindgren, Phil Gordon, Erik Seidel, Andy Bloch, John Juanda, Clonie Gowen, and more.)

The Full Tilt "team" of players is for marketing purposes only, attracting attention to Full Tilt's poker site. Online poker marketing at the *WSOP* isn't new; there were plenty of online sites represented last year. But Full Tilt's effort completely dwarfs anything done by other major sites. In addition to the ubiquitous red-and-black jerseys, Full Tilt has opened a hospitality suite that is open to the general public, where fans can relax with food and drinks, and interact with some of the Full Tilt players. The hospitality suite is conveniently located right across the hall from the tournament room.

Barry Greenstein has already won a bracelet this year (Event #19: $1,500 Pot-Limit Omaha), and as always, he'll set a shining example by donating his tournament winnings ($128,505) to charity. But he added another good deed to that one. After winning the bracelet, he diverted all talk about his victory to a young man suffering from cancer. Greenstein dedicated his victory to Charlie Tuttle, a 26-year-old poker enthusiast from Tennessee. Tuttle's cancer was terminal, and he wasn't able to travel to the *World Series* this year. But several professional players took time out of their schedules to give him a phone call and lift his spirits. His favorite player, the charismatic Marcel Luske, even sang to him over a cell phone, and his family said it was the first time he'd laughed in a long time. Other players called him as well, each one lifting his spirits even higher. While Tuttle couldn't attend the *Series* this year, his presence was definitely felt.

Charlie Tuttle died late at night on Tuesday, June 21st (the day after Greenstein's victory). But poker brought joy to his life, and several top players brought joy to his last days.

Echoes of the Past

Few of us were around to watch Johnny Moss and Nick "The Greek" Dandalos back in 1949, but there is a similar event taking place during this year's event.

Daniel Negreanu has issued an open challenge to anyone in the world, announcing that he will play anybody in a heads-up match in their choice of poker games (from a list of nine games), for anywhere from $100,000 to $500,000 per game.

Several players have accepted the challenge for a single game, but Barry Greenstein has accepted the full challenge (playing all nine games) for the full amount (half a million dollars each, per game). All of the events take place in a casino where the public can watch from the rail, just like the Moss-Dandalos match from 56 years ago. These matches take place at the new Wynn Casino, where Negreanu is under contract as their "Poker Ambassador."

Both players are playing in most of the events here at the *World Series,* but they often agree to head